

Island Birds + Invading Boa = Trouble in Paradise

By *ANDREW C. REVKIN*

January 27, 2011, 3:21 pm

For thousands of years, human mobility has brought all manner of species to isolated islands and regions, with the result being powerfully disrupted ecosystems. As I've said before, in recent decades we've become something of a Waring blender for biology, for better or worse.

Snakes have been particularly damaging. Their impact can also be particularly, well, vivid, as seen in this sequence of images of an introduced boa constrictor swallowing a yellow oriole in Aruba last August (the photos are by Greg Peterson, the chairman of Aruba Birdlife Conservation):



Peter Fong, a writer, editor and flyfishing guide, has tracked Dot Earth coverage of travails related to various invasive species and, after tagging along recently with the Boa Constrictor Task Force in Aruba, sent the following Dot Earth Post Card providing a closeup view of Aruba's struggle with introduced snakes.

It's worth reading, particularly, because he points out that the reptiles, while perhaps the most charismatic enemy of native birds, are hardly the only threat:

Like many islands elsewhere in the world, Aruba has seen its wildlife powerfully affected by introduced species. Boa constrictors are one of the latest threats.



Courtesy of Peter Fong Islanders in Aruba have held several roundups aimed at blunting the impact of boa constrictors on birds.

Aruba's native mockingbirds, owls and orioles have met the enemy. And it swallows them whole. According to Aruba Birdlife Conservation, boa constrictors kill more than 17,000 island birds per year. Unless more robust efforts are made to control these ravenous invaders, local extinction is a real possibility for some bird species.

The first action taken by the Caribbean nation's Boa Constrictor Task Force occurred on a rainy Sunday morning in December. My brother and I joined a group near the defunct drive-in theater, situated on a limestone plateau perhaps 200 feet above sea level. All of us (except my brother, who was visiting from California) had attended an hour-long workshop on boa identification and capture.

These were the terms of engagement: no machetes or other sharp weapons. As Diego Marquez, the task force's co-chair, explained, "We are a peace-loving nation." Boa hunters would pin their prey's head with a household broom, grab the neck with a gloved hand, then imprison the captive in a biodegradable plastic bag with the same technique that New York's dog owners use to scoop poop. Captured boas would be euthanized in the freezer at the state veterinarian's office.

To avoid cases of mistaken identity, we learned the rule of thumb: if a snake is thicker than your thumb, it's a boa. Because Aruba's two native snakes, the cascabel (a rare rattlesnake) and the santanero (also known as the Aruban cat-eyed snake) are both small, this rule actually works here.

As a former resident of Montana and Vermont, I love hunting and foraging of all types, but the boas evaded me. After two hours of searching the cactus, aloe, and prickly acacia—sometimes crawling to get a better look at tree trunks and leaf litter—I counted exactly six whiptail lizards, three toads, two geckoes, and one santanero. My brother, thorn-weary and drenched to the skin, was also skunked. In all, about 120 volunteers and national park personnel—divided into three groups—tallied a total of eleven boas, with three of these caught by a single, sharp-eyed ranger. We guessed that the steady rain might have had something to do with our lack of success.

Then again, a second boa hunt in early January, with about the same number of volunteers concentrated in a different area—the dry hills overlooking the island's newly revived oil refinery—enjoyed clear skies but even fewer captures: only five. I noticed some familiar faces on that second day, including members of TurtugAruba.org (devoted to saving sea turtles), as well as Benny Sevinger, the government's minister of infrastructure. On the way back to my car, I overheard one man joke that snakes lie low when politicians are about.

Boas were introduced to Aruba as early as 1999, probably by irresponsible pet owners. Estimates for the current population on the 74-square-mile island (slightly smaller than Brooklyn) range from 2,000 to 8,000, so these first efforts will hardly change the dynamics of the invasion. But at least that's 16 fewer non-native predators for the local birds to worry about.

Native birds remain subject to other threats, of course: feral cats, habitat degradation from free-ranging goats and donkeys, and outright habitat loss due to hotel and golf-course development. Professor Howard Reinert of the College of New Jersey, who has studied Aruba's snakes since 1985, argues that "Aruba would have a lot more birds, lizards, rabbits, bats, and cascabels if everyone would hunt and kill goats instead of boas."

Introduced by Spanish conquistadors during Aruba's colonial period, goats and donkeys have disrupted the island's ecosystem for so long that biologists can only guess what the landscape would look like without them. Considering the list of potential enemies to the environment, an invasive snake makes an easy target, especially compared to the donkeys, whose long familiar faces have inspired a nonprofit sanctuary on the island. In the long run, however, I hope that it won't be the enemy that matters, but the solidarity inspired by citizen action.

With any luck, a public motivated to control boa populations will extend that concern to the bedrock of all healthy wildlife populations: habitat.

Bron : http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/27/island-birds-invading-boas-trouble-in-paradise/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0